

ART & ENTERTAINMENT



VISUAL ARTS

The return of the mural

By Jennifer Benepe

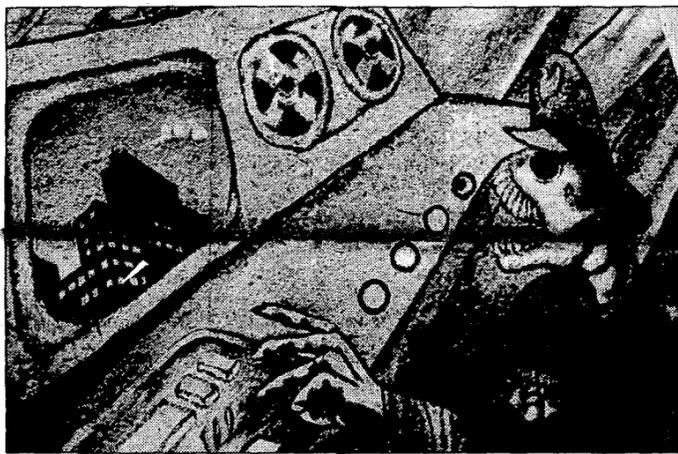
It is a Sunday afternoon in Chicago, and the sun beats on a white wall soon to be transformed by muralists into a statement against the ominous machinery of a World War III. The anti-war mural will be painted over a 10-day period in a thematic filmstrip across a railroad viaduct in a near-west Chicago neighborhood.

Described by Cindy Weiss of the Chicago Muralists' Group as a "no-man's land," the vicinity of the wall is one of the city's largest decaying industrial areas. A lone hamburger and hotdog luncheonette and grassy lots are the nearest signs of life.

The mural event is the brain-storm of John Weber and William Walker. The CMG and Casa Aztlan, a Chicano muralist group, are collaborating. In addition to providing a collective expression, the event commemorates the 1968 anti-war demonstrations at the Democratic Convention in Chicago and the National Chicano Moratorium in Los Angeles that claimed three lives (*In These Times*, Sept. 10).

The site is atypical for the painting of a Chicago mural, because it is not within a cohesive neighborhood. Since the inception of the Chicago muralist movement in the early '70s, muralists have depended on the communities for support and cooperation in the financing of a mural, and have collaborated on the choice of themes and statements.

The seeds of nationalist and ethnic expression in mural painting sparked and exploded with the completion of the "Wall of Respect," a project initiated by William Walker and other Southside Chicago artists and residents in 1968. The mural became a rallying point for black nationalist feeling and brought community outrage when it mysteriously burned down. Several Chicago groups, including CMG, Casa Aztlan and the Public Arts Workshop, have used community organizing and nationalist



themes as the backbone of their murals.

This anti-war mural is an attempt to revitalize the same youthful and liberal enthusiasm that spawned the "Wall of Respect." But it is also a recognition of the complex political and technological factors that characterize this era—of high unemployment, corporate power, an

endless energy crunch and a less politically-active citizenry.

The site is also typical for mural-painting, however, because it is in an area trafficked only by blue-collar and working-class people on their way to work by foot or by car. And although the artists say the working-class factory worker is precisely the person they want to

reach, the isolation of the site may not attract wide recognition.

Arguments.

Now on Sunday the streets are deserted. A stormy discussion over the mural has already begun. Jose gestures to the empty street and asks, "Why do they have to paint it here? Because it's free?" There is some disagreement between him and his friends on whether this mural will serve a purpose. A pedlar walks by and tries to sell Jose a watch and a fake diamond ring from a wrinkled paper bag. Jose wants to know if the pedlar's "political consciousness" has been in any way altered by the mural. He believes that this mural, like so many others in

The question of political and social impact has always been a sore point for artists who want to move mountains. For this event the stakes are high, the purpose an expression of peace on the part of the public—especially the working class, the draftable class.

Most of the artists attending the event have full-time jobs as factory workers, librarians and clerks, and paint after work or on the weekends. Among them, Rich Capalbo, a crane operator, brings his children to help him paint. His mural shows three men dressed in military olive pointing their rifles at a tiny unemployment building and a schoolhouse.

A mural being painted by Aurelio Diaz depicts four men marching squarely forward, placards balanced on their shoulders. One reads, "Stop World War III" in both Spanish and English. "It is the first recognition of the threat of nuclear power in the Mexican community," explains Carlos Cumpian, an attending artist. "The working class is just beginning to raise the issue," he adds, "an issue that has been, up to now, only a middle-class issue."

A third mural shows two skeletons with *cazavates* (or skulled heads), dressed in the military garb of the USSR and U.S., sitting at their MX missile control boards and pushing buttons with their boney fingers. Above, two UN officials flanked by the UN world-sphere-and-laurels symbol are being drenched in red paint poured on them by dissidents from above. Grey MX missiles shooting from the center create the final chaos of militarism.

These murals, and the many others being painted strip-like across the viaduct, are heavy in political imagery. For the workers who pass by in their 1978 Dodge Darts, the subject matter may be a simple challenge to recognition, or it may elicit response, even action.

In the meantime, Jose's unrelenting manner has gotten four people involved in a debate over the impact of this anti-war mural. Only in its second day, already the mural has called attention to itself by the stark contrast of vivid and colorful images of fear, war and the threat of destruction against the grey background of this no-man's land. ■ Jennifer Benepe is a Chicago writer.



Chicago, will go largely unnoticed, and thus become another "wasted" vestige of human emotion.

"What do you think it means?" Jose asks the pedlar. Uncertain, the man queries, "More jobs?" "Is that all?" Jose asks. "Come on, look at it, tell me what you really think," he insists. "No more nuclear plants," the pedlar says. And then, with more sureness he adds, "It's about the Bible—that man is about to destroy himself—and that the world was planned that way."

The mural event "is an opportunity to awaken and influence public action," said a spokesperson for the CMG, "and if it is done in a powerful way, even if it hasn't brought action, it will have served its purpose."

CALENDAR

MADISON, WI

September 26-27

Come to the FIRST DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST ORGANIZING COMMITTEE MIDWEST REGIONAL CONFERENCE. Workplace, campus and community activities will gather to participate in workshops on labor, the women's movement, the draft and more. A regional structure will be created to build a socialist presence in Middle America. Free housing is available. Registration \$12 (\$6 unemployed and low income). Contact DSOC, Box 517, 800 Langdon St., Madison, WI 53706 or call (608)249-6054, 241-4316, 251-5972.

ANN ARBOR, MI

September 26-27

The FIRST NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON WORKERS CULTURE. Workers, union officials, scholars and artists will discuss what workers' culture is, demonstrate historical and current examples in various media and suggest directions for the future. Participants will include Brendan

Sexton, Paul Buhle, Ralph Fasanella, Stanley Aronowitz, Archie Green, Sarah Ogan Gunning, Joyce Kornbluth and Carlos Arce. For more information call (313)764-6395.

CHIPPEWA FALLS, WI

September 26-28

THE CITIZENS PARTY OF WISCONSIN 1st STATE CONVENTION will be held at the Farmers' Union's Kamp Kenwood. The purpose of this convention is to lay the foundation for a new grassroots, broad-based, political movement that will build economic democracy in Wisconsin. Workshops on issues ranging from runaway shops, labor and politics, uranium mining, economic crisis, solar energy, racism and repression, democratic-socialist-feminism, and regional corporate power. Speakers include: Tom O'Connell, Eugene Havens, Al Gedicks, Roger Bybee, Anne Gordon, Gary Edelman, Monte Bute, Marilyn Clement, George Daltsman, Art Heitzer, Rob Kennedy, Ian Harris and Mary Radke. Also, organizing for Commoner-Harris campaign, literature, political music, food, lodging, childcare and films. Cost: \$15.00. For information call Madison (608)257-

7068; Milwaukee (414)444-4744; Stevens Points (715)341-8257; Menomonie (715)265-7148. To pre-register call special registration telephone number at (608)785-2043 anytime. Call before Sept. 24. Help us build a new progressive movement.

CHICAGO, IL

September 29

The NEW AMERICAN MOVEMENT'S SECOND CITY SOCIALIST SCHOOL begins its fall semester of courses. Courses include Basic Marxism, Religion and Socialism, Socialist Feminism, Political Economy of Chicago and Motherhood. Call 871-7700 for more information.

CHICAGO, IL

October 2-December 11

SOCIALIST-FEMINIST STUDY & WORK GROUP. Blazing Star NAM invites women to join us in discussing socialist feminism and in working to pressure the media to present more positive images of women and lesbians. Initial session features presentation on socialist-feminism by ITT columnist Roberta Lynch at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 2, at 3342 N. Broadway. For more info leave message for

Hannah at 924-5057.

PITTSBURGH, PA

October 10-12

NATIONAL LABOR CONFERENCE FOR SAFE ENERGY AND FULL EMPLOYMENT. Sponsored by 6 AFL-CIO Unions—the Machinists, Chemical Workers, Graphic Arts, Service Employees, Woodworkers and Furniture Workers—as well as the UAW, Mineworkers, Longshoremen and Warehousemen, and the Labor Committee for Safe Energy and Full Employment, this conference will seek to educate and activate the trade union movement in the struggle for safe energy and full employment. \$15 Registration. Any trade unionist welcome. Contact: Labor Committee for Safe Energy and Full Employment, 1536 16th St. N.W., Washington, DC 20036. (202)265-7190.

Use the calendar to announce conferences, lectures, films, events, etc. The cost is \$20.00 for two insertions and \$10.00 for each additional insert, for copy of 40 words or less (additional words are 35¢ each). Payment must accompany your announcement, and should be sent to the attention of Bill Rehm.